

Slay case corners Burnett the rat

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By BARBARA ROSS

Daily News Staff Writer

For 33 years, Michael Burnett bargained his way out of a lifetime in jail by helping law enforcement authorities collar other bad guys in exchange for leniency.

Last week, for the first time in his life, the Brooklyn-born mole who broke the corruption scandals in New York and Chicago was hit with a non-negotiable charge: first-degree murder.

"My commitment is to see that Michael (Burnett) will be sittin' in Old Sparky some day. I would like to see him go there without passing Go, collecting \$200 or any other benefits from the FBI," said Capt. Al Ortenzo of the Fort Lauderdale Police Department.

Ortenzo's fervor is understandable.

Woman disappears

It took Florida police 11 years to find out what happened to Adelaide Stiles, a 70-year-old woman who disappeared after getting suspicious about how Burnett, who had romanced her, invested her life savings of \$40,000.

Tuesday, they charged Burnett and two others with feeding Stiles to the sharks, and now prosecutors are studying whether to charge Burnett with a second murder: Anne Sessa, a Florida widow who disappeared in 1977 after having an affair with Burnett and investing the bulk of her estate with him.

Both cases were dormant until earlier this year when

the Daily News and reporter Gaeton Fonzi in South Florida magazine published articles on Burnett, who has been arrested 27 times and convicted nine times on charges ranging from stock fraud to bribery.

Served eight years

He has served a mere eight years in jail because, until now, he wriggled out of serving more time by offering to rat on others.

The articles questioned the FBI's ethics in using Burnett as a mole when he was suspected of murdering Stiles, Sessa and a third Floridian.

They also reported that Florida cops felt the FBI shielded Burnett for years because he was making major federal cases and had joined the Witness Protection Program, in which he changed his name from Michael Raymond to Michael Burnett.

When the stories broke, Burnett was again an FBI operative. He'd been arrested in Tennessee in July 1984 but got leniency in return for helping to expose New York and Chicago officials taking bribes from the head of a collection agency.

FBI defends using him

When the Burnett controversy broke, the FBI defended using him. "Whether it's right or wrong, people who have been accused of murder or even convicted of murder have been used as informants," said Paul Miller of the FBI's Miami office.

The FBI denied it ever stymied Florida investigators and vowed to help with the renewed probe, turning over reams of material that provided fresh leads and disclosed other crimes Burnett was suspected of committing.

Last week, even after Burnett was charged with murder, the FBI said simply, "We're aware of the guy's background. We've used hit men and organized crime figures to testify against other hit men and other organized crime figures."

Others disagree with the FBI's priorities.

William Heffernan, an ethics specialist at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, said Burnett's murder charge makes it more compelling for the FBI to explain why it used a suspected murderer to catch criminals accused of lesser crimes. He also called for a congressional inquiry.

"Could the FBI have achieved the same results

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The Washington Post

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with some other mole? Should the FBI draw up some guidelines to determine what's an acceptable tradeoff? This is something for (Rep. Peter) Rodino's (House Judiciary) committee," Heffernan said.

"You don't work effectively by using Sunday school teachers" in criminal investigations, Ortenzo acknowledges. But, he said, when an informant is "very clearly implicated" in a homicide, the murder investigation should take top priority.

Tenacity and luck

The story of the Stiles and Sessa cases is one of police tenacity and luck, and the extent of the FBI's cooperation is still a matter of debate.

Fort Lauderdale detective Gary Ciani said the cases were "probably the most frustrating" because "everywhere you went witnesses were either dead or had had a stroke. Papers were destroyed. Buildings were leveled.

"You realized you had to depend on people, people who get pretty confident about their stories after 11 years," he said.

Ciani said he, Detective John Palmer of the Broward County sheriff's office and Jack Lovell, an investigator for the local prosecutor, spent their first weeks going over old ground.

Interview witnesses

They found witnesses who saw Stiles and Burnett leave together on a vacation, re-established the motive (her checking account drained into a Burnett company) and interviewed people who had known the couple in 1975.

Ciani said Burnett's secretary, Barbara Bishop, told them that in 1975, on her boss' orders, she checked into a Holiday Inn, posing as Stiles. That gave Burnett an alibi: that he left Stiles at the motel and never saw her again.

Robert Johnstone, Burnett's go-fer in 1975, refused to talk after Burnett's attorney, William Aronwald, "ordered us out of the house," Ciani said.

A buddy testifies

Police say another Burnett buddy, Ralph Rapp, provided more details: Stiles was thrown over the side of a boat, and Sessa was "under a rock."

Ciani said detectives figured that if Burnett had told Rapp about the murders, "he could have told others." They concentrated on interviewing people named in the FBI's Burnett files.

One of the names was Vernon Raye Frazier, who is charged with Stiles' murder, along with Johnstone and Burnett.

The cops discovered that Frazier had set Burnett up for the Tennessee arrest after he got cold feet about going through with an armed burglary of a wealthy businessman's house.

On March 28, Ciani said, police asked the FBI where Frazier was. They were told Frazier was believed to be somewhere in California and that federal marshals wanted him for a parole violation.

Under federal detainer

What the FBI didn't say—and it's unclear why—is that almost six weeks earlier, the marshals had found Frazier in a San Diego jail where they put him under a federal detainer. That meant Frazier would go into federal custody as soon he finished serving time on a state charge of passing bad checks.

"I'm not saying the FBI was trying to hide him. I don't know why they didn't know where he was. All I know is that we did an intense search for him and turned up empty," Ciani said.

Florida cops discovered Frazier's whereabouts accidentally on June 2 when the Chicago Tribune ran a jail-house interview in which Frazier said Burnett had bragged about committing several murders.

Ciani said that in August, after several interviews with police, Frazier admitted he'd actually been an eyewitness to the Stiles murder. He "broke down and cried. It was a major breakthrough," Ciani said.

Fort Lauderdale cops began a complicated, monthlong battle to get custody of Frazier. They were desperate to get him before his San Diego jail term ended in mid-September because if the marshals got him first, Florida police would need a subpoena to get him out of federal custody. Legally, that would mean giving Frazier full immunity.

"I thought there was more they (the FBI) could do to assist us in producing Frazier," said Ortenzo. Without that help, he and Ciani got Frazier on Sept. 4, just as the marshals were in the jail processing paperwork to hold him.

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"I kept looking for the marshals at the airport. As the plane went down the runway, we both looked out the window with a sigh of relief that we weren't being stopped," Ortenzo recalled.

On Sept. 8, police said they got another shock: Frazier now confessed that he hadn't just seen the murder, he'd participated in it with Burnett and Johnstone.

"We tried to trip him up several ways" to make sure he was telling the truth, but he passed every test, Ciani said.

Frazier is expected to cooperate in exchange for a second-degree murder conviction, which means life in prison instead of the possible death penalty that Burnett faces.

"I think we have a pretty good case. We have the witnesses, the motive," said Ciani.

Burnett is now in a federal penitentiary, coping with a bad heart and troublesome liver. The only thing that may give out before the cops is his health.

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An old woman & the sea

Burnett compatriot describes slaying of Adelaide Stiles

By GAETON FONZI

Special to the Daily News

World-class swindler Michael Burnett calmly lit a cigar as the small cabin cruiser cut the waters south of Miami off the Florida Keys. Allegedly, it was the signal for murder.

Within minutes, Adelaide Stiles, a large, frumpy woman with hair dyed pitch-black, would be dead, her head bashed in by the swing of a tire iron and her body dismembered and chummed overboard for the sharks.

That is the account of Vernon Frazier, 34, a husky ex-Marine who has confessed to participating in Stiles' murder with Burnett and Robert (Bobby Dell) Johnstone, a boat captain from Port Orange, Fla. Based on a jailhouse interview, it is told here for the first time publicly.

"When Michael lit the cigar I kind of froze for a second," recalls Frazier. "Then for some strange reason I snapped right out of it and moved quickly to get the tire iron we put hidden next to the sink. Michael had sat Stiles where her back was to me and he was keepin' her attention by talkin'."

"I just blocked everything out of my mind and concentrated on her neck area. They told me in the

first time on the left side of the head. Then I hit her again. It was real quick, like bam! bam! When I hit her the second time she fell out of the chair. She was lookin' up at Michael as she went down and her eyes were like in a sort of shock.

"To this day I think I can hear her say, 'Why, Michael?' but I know I was probably imaginin' it. It was just her life breath goin' out of her."

A 33-year history of crime

Frazier's story provides a chilling look at the murder in 1975 of one woman—an easy victim who was trusting, eccentric and lonely. It also gives an insight into the allegedly murderous side of Michael Burnett, a notorious con man who has continuously been protected by the FBI.

Burnett has a 33-year history of stock swindles, forgery, bribery and other crimes, but time and again escaped long jail sentences by becoming a mole for the FBI.

When Stiles was murdered, Burnett was in the federal Witness Protection Program. His true name, in fact, was Michael Raymond. The feds changed it after he testified in 1971 before a Senate subcommittee investigating organized crime.

In his latest incarnation, Burnett was used by the FBI as a sting man who taped key conversations in a lengthy investigation that helped uncover the city corruption scandal and led to indictments of Chicago officials.

At the time, Florida police listed Burnett as the prime suspect in the murder of Stiles and two others. All had been conned by Burnett. All had invested money with him. All disappeared without a trace.

Met in Detroit

Frazier says he met Burnett in 1974 in Detroit. At the time, Frazier

was working for an organized crime family in Michigan as a runner carrying gambling profits, counterfeit money and stolen securities between Detroit, Chicago, New York and Canada. He says he also transported stolen stocks for Burnett.

Frazier claims Burnett was anxious to work him into his organization. Frazier had some college education, was trained in the Marines and was an associate minister and preacher at the Second Baptist Church in his hometown of Monroe, Mich.

Recalls Frazier: "Michael told me, 'If you can convince people to believe in God, then you can convince anybody of anything.'"

Frazier says when Burnett called him to come to Florida he told him he had "a small problem with some old bitch."

"I admired Michael's life style, the way he dressed, how he talked, the way he maneuvered among important business people," Frazier remembers. "And I figured the only way that me, a black guy, would get the same respect and prestige he had, was for me to get into his tight circle."

"When he asked me to come to

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EXCLUSIVE

Marines not to aim for the head because if the head moves, you miss. And I didn't want to miss, I wanted to make sure I hit her and...and..."

Frazier pauses and stares for a moment.

"...and I just hit her. I hit her the

The Washington Post
The Washington Times
Daily News (New York) P. 7
The New York Times
The Wall Street Journal
The Chicago Tribune
The Los Angeles Times
The Christian Science Monitor
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Florida to murder that old lady, my first reaction was I was honored he thought enough of me to invite me down here on this occasion."

Frazier also remembers thinking, "It's a golden opportunity."

Frazier says Burnett told him that Stiles, 66, was pressing him to explain how he was investing the money she gave him, estimated to be at least \$40,000. Although Stiles loved him, Burnett told Frazier, he learned that her friends were urging her to have police check out his background.

"That would have brought his whole empire down," says Frazier, "because he had dozens of other scams going on the side."

At the time, Burnett was renting the seven-bedroom waterfront home of Fort Lauderdale drug kingpin Ken Burnstine, who recently had been arrested.

Frazier earlier visited Burnett in Florida and was familiar with Burnett's ongoing con of Stiles, a woman who was well-known socially but had grown increasingly lonely and eccentric as she grew older.

Then she met Burnett. "God must love me, having me meet my Mike at this particular time," she wrote to a friend.

According to Frazier, Burnett planned the murder in detail with him and Bobby Johnstone the evening before. Burnett had earlier told Stiles he would join her on a trip to London. Now he would suggest that they take a leisurely cruise to help him unwind from "business pressures" before departing from Miami.

A toast to murder

Frazier describes the boat as a small cabin cruiser that Johnstone captained and kept docked behind the house.

After their planning session, Frazier says, Burnett took him and Johnstone to the Mai Kai, a popular, crowded Fort Lauderdale nightclub where they had dinner, toasted their murder plans and watched the Polynesian dancing girls.

The next morning, Burnett, a gourmet cook, fixed them a hearty breakfast and then left to pick up Stiles. Meanwhile, Frazier and Johnstone loaded concrete blocks, bricks, a hacksaw, an ax and plastic bags aboard the boat. When Burnett returned, he asked Frazier, who pretended to be his houseboy, to help unload Stiles' luggage from the car.

"I was watchin' Michael be all lovey-dovey with her as she's gettin' out of the car," Frazier recalls, "and I was laughin' to myself inside because I know this man don't care nothin' about this lady and in a few hours he's gonna make her a dead old lady."

Still, Frazier now says, as the boat headed out from Fort Everglades and

down the Florida coast, and as he watched Burnett ply Stiles with sweet talk and martinis in the cabin below, he began having second thoughts.

"She wasn't attractive, by a long shot," he says, "and here she's thinkin' she finally found somebody who loved her. I started feelin' sorry for the woman. I suddenly didn't want to kill her."

'Too far into the game'

Frazier says he reported his feeling to Johnstone, who was at the wheel on the bridge. "Bobby told me, 'Well, Vernon, you're too far into the game now,'" Frazier recalls. "He says, 'If you don't do it, we're gonna do it, and then we're gonna get rid of you.'"

Later Frazier saw Johnstone put the boat on automatic pilot and go below to whisper to Burnett. Shortly, Burnett soothed Frazier.

"I understand what you're goin' through," Frazier says Burnett told him. "He says, 'Don't worry about it. Just put your feelings aside and concentrate on what you're gonna do. And stay out of the cabin for a while so you'll get some fresh air and won't have to listen to the bull I'm throwin' at her.'"

Soon Frazier's misgivings turned to a sense of impending excitement.

"It was kind of like before a football game," recalls Frazier, who was a star running back on his high school team. "You feel your adrenaline gettin' built up because you know you're gonna be on center stage."

The prearranged signal for action, according to Frazier, came when Burnett lit a cigar as the boat moved into the less crowded waters of Hawk Channel off the Keys. Frazier wielded the tire iron.

Then, Frazier says, both he and Burnett stood motionless for a moment, staring down at the crumpled heap of Adelaide Stiles. "Then Bobby came down from the bridge and Michael said, 'Let's get this over with,' and we moved into action."

They used a hacksaw and an ax to dismember the body. "Michael wanted to make sure we opened her up enough so that the sharks would get to her all," Frazier says.

The parts were put in plastic garbage bags and what was left of the body was lifted out of the cabin and draped over the side of the boat. A cinder block was tied to the torso.

"Then Michael handed me his 9-mm. gun and told me to shoot her in the head," apparently to open every part of the body to the sharks. Frazier says. "He said careful not to shoot the boat or else all of us would never get back. I shot her carefully twice in the head."

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Gaston Fonzi is a Florida-based investigative reporter who broke the story of the FBI's relationship with master con man Michael Burnett. Fonzi revealed that the FBI used Burnett as an undercover mole in a Chicago corruption probe even though Burnett was a suspect in three murders. Federal authorities also used Burnett to secretly tape record a conversation here that played a key role in exposing the Parking Violations Bureau scandal. Based on an exclusive interview with a confessed killer, Fonzi now tells the story of one of Burnett's alleged murders.

After the boat was turned around and the automatic pilot set at trolling speed, the three men retrieved the plastic bags from the cabin and slowly dumped the body parts over the transom. As the boat drifted north, Frazier looked back and saw the water begin to pop with splashes of fish in a feeding frenzy.

"On the way back," Frazier recalls, "Michael told me I did a real good job and that I had to remember the first one is the hardest. He said after you get your first murder under your belt, the next one is easier."

Back at the house in Fort Lauderdale, Frazier says, Burnett paid him \$10,000 and told him he now considered him part of his inner circle. "I felt a real sense of satisfaction," Frazier now admits. "It was like any good job you do, you put yourself on the back. And I was proud that I did such a good job for Michael. He was my idol."

Then Burnett broke out a bottle of good red wine and the three men toasted the successful completion of Adelaide Stiles' murder.

Frazier, who recently pleaded guilty to the Stiles murder, told his story in an interview arranged by his attorney. Public Defender Steven Michaelson.

Burnett and Johnstone were indicted on first-degree murder charges in Florida on Sept. 30. The case was built on Frazier's word and other evidence gathered by Fort Lauderdale homicide Detective Gary Ciani and state attorney investigator Jack Lovell.

But local officials have yet to extricate Burnett from the clutches of federal authorities, who consider him a valuable asset in their political corruption cases in Chicago.